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ABSTRACT

Competition is evident within all aspects of life, among all types of people, and throughout the recorded history of mankind. Sport as both an educational process and profession is no exception. In recent years, however, the concept of competition has been increasingly subjected to examination by both educators and participants. What is competition? Can competition be used as an educational tool? Is there more than one type of competition? Can competition be abused? Three distinct types of competition have been identified: direct, indirect, and cooperative. Also identified are the problems of inclusion-exclusion, zero-negative-positive sum game theory, and aggression reinforcement. Each form of competition possesses both positive and negative aspects; each can be used as an educational tool; and each is vulnerable to abuse. Failure to understand the various concepts of competition and their attendant problems may result in the perpetuation of programs premised on a competitive theory that alienates rather than attracts the population to be served. Continued misapplication of competitive theory may lead to further erosion of sport program support, whereas intelligent understanding and careful application may possibly result in structural changes but may also generate new and increased program support. (Author)

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THE COMPETITIVE EMPHASIS OF SPORT: A NEED FOR REFLECTION

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THE COMPETITIVE EMPHASIS OF SPORT: A NEED FOR REFLECTION

Competition is evident within most aspects of life, among most types of people, and throughout the recorded history of man. Sport, both as a process and as an activity, is no exception. Nonetheless, the competitive aspect of sport has been subjected to a considerable degree of investigation and criticism. In many instances, the results have produced alienation towards "competitive" sport. Often this alienation is manifested in the form of reduced support for programs catering to the development of elite athletes. If programs designed to produce the "Olympic athlete" are to maintain and increase the philosophical and financial support generated by the public at large:: then perhaps the form of sport programs provided for the masses are in need of examination. Given the tenor of the times, it behooves sport administrators to reflect upon the competitive emphasis placed upon sport.

Baron Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the Modern Olympic Games, stated that:

> In order that a hundred dedicate themselves to physical culture, fifty have to practice sport. In order that fifty practice sport, twenty have to be specialists. In order that twenty specialize, five have to be capable of amazing achievements (1935).

Yet, today, we find that many sport programs are primarily designed to identify individuals possessing the potential to become members of the elite in their particular activity. Once discovered, these athletes are provided special attention. On the other hand, those who desire to participate in sport but fail to possess the necessary attributes to excel, are often either completely abandoned or provided sport programs totally inadequate to accommodate their

collective needs.

Pierre Seurin (1973), in a paper presented at the International Olympic Academy, proposed that:

> We should awake in individuals the passion for sports engendered by the fun of the game, the need to assert oneself through effort, the rise to the top, the joy of victory over oneself and others. This passion should teach the "freedom of excess."

However, he concluded that, "...this 'thrust towards improvement' has too often and too exclusively turned--this moreover was Coubertin's wish--towards selective competition." Therefore, he asked, "How many adults (or youths) abandon sport just because they can no longer rate among the first?"

Seurin identifies the crux of the problem: competition can be carried too far. Baron Pierre de Coubertin contributed to today's problem when he communicated in a speech marking his retirement as President of the International Olympic Committee that genuine athletics could not be performed in a "timid" or "moderate" manner (Lenk, 1976). Coubertin further commented that the slogan Pater Didon gave his pupils: Citius, Altius, Fortius (faster, higher, stronger) should continue to be followed (Ibid.). More recently, however, the introduction of the "Lombardian" competitive philosophy that, "winning isn't everything, it's the only thing," in all too many instances, results in the limitation of general participation and an increase in the probability of alienation.

To understand the nature of the problem, competition must be defined, its various forms identified, and a determination made regarding the potential for abuse. Loy defined competition as:

> A struggle for supremacy between two or more opposing sides. We interpret the phrase "between two or more opposing sides" rather broadly to encompass the competitive relationship between man and other objects of nature, both animate and inanimate (pp. 4-5).

Slusher defined competition as "a 'contention of interests', that is, it is a

rivalry between opposing forces (man, animal or nature) in which the interests of both are not mutually obtainable (Fait & Billings, p. 16). In sum, competition by itself is neither good nor bad. It does, however, require guidance, understanding and intelligent application.

The form of competition defined by Slusher is referred to as direct competition. Due to its operational structure, direct competition necessitates that for each successful competitor, at least one competitor must fail. This situation is described by game theorists as a "zero sum game," i.e., the sum of the winners and losers is zero.

An inquiry into most sport programs would probably reveal that in the majority of competitive situations, the end result produces a "negative sum game," i.e., the number of losers exceeds the number of winners. Inevitably, direct competition results in either a zero or negative sum game (Ibid.).

A second form of competition, one that is not dependent upon winning or losing, is called indirect competition. According to Fait and Billings (1974) indirect competition enables a "positive sum game" to occur, i.e., the number of winners can be greater than the number of losers. If past performance is used as the criterion to evaluate current performance, it then becomes unnecessary to defeat someone else; success does not hinge upon another's failure. Through the processes of indirect competition, it is within the realm of possibility for all to succeed, for all to reap the benefits of achievement. Positive sum conditions are highly desirable to stimulate and maintain participation in sport by the general populace. Successful and enjoyable sport participation experiences will in turn enhance the probability for continued and increased support of high level programs designed to develop the elite athlete.

Commenting on the inclusion-exclusion processes of sport, Tutko states:

> It's very painful to think of all the youngsters who love sport but who are being eliminated at every stage just because they

> aren't going to be "winners"--because they are too short or too slow or too weak. The genuine benefits of athletics--health, sociability, and developing personal psychological growth, cooperation, loyalty, and pride--are being undermined...(Alley, p. 105).

The point to be made is that when an individual is denied the opportunity to participate, his adjustment is usually not particularly positive towards the development of a favorable attitude regarding things athletic. To illustrate the point, consider how many intramural athletes fail to complete their schedule after losing a significant number of matches or how few students elect to take an additional course in an area in which they have received an inferior grade (Fait & Billings, pp. 20-21).

Jack Scott, referring to the selective processes of sport, suggests, "such procedures enable only those to succeed who have the particular physical capacity required to survive a ruthless selection process." However, Scott is not completely anti-pursuit of excellence. He writes that, "The radical ethic has no quarrel with the Lombardian quest for excellence. It only says that the means by which that excellence is achieved is as important as the excellence itself (Alley, p. 103).

What has resulted from having employed excessive direct competition in our sport programs and how has it reflected in our daily living habits? Some research indicates that:

> In a series of studies measuring children 5-10 years of age, situations were created where rewards (toys) were possible for competing children if they cooperated in the manipulation of materials. American children, in general, more often reacted against their own best interests, or, as the researcher expressed it, "the American Competitive Spirit may be alive and well, but it has produced a culture whose children are systematically irrational (Campbell, p. 145)."

In addition, inquiry should be made regarding how many people willfully withdraw from sports because the competitive system identifies their relative weaknesses. Another area of investigation should focus on the number of

people (youths and adults) who refrain from confrontation with others either because they are fearful of defeat or because on a higher moral level, they prefer cooperation to struggle

In as much as sport programs are potential learning experiences, a desire that Coubertin had espoused for the Olympic Games, they should be made available for all individuals desiring to participate, regardless of proficiency in the chosen activity. Yet, because of exclusion policies this is not the case in a majority of sport programs. Consequently, numerous individuals are denied the learning experiences afforded by athletic participation. Too many sport programs throughout the world are based upon principles of exclusion while verbal attributions are made to promulgate the myth of inclusion (Pease, Locke & Burlingame, pp. 42-43).

What can be done to stem the continuing emphasis on winning? How can a semblance of balance be restored? It is suggested that an initial action would be to begin to place an emphasis on performance improvement in relation to previous achievements. This would constitute a positive application of indirect competition; an application which would not only eliminate the need for a single "winner" but, in turn, would produce multiple "winners," thus a positive sum game.

It should be noted that indirect competition and <u>cooperation</u> are not one in the same. As previously indicated, competition denotes a struggle. In a cooperative situation, the participants must act in a mutually reinforcing manner. "Although indirect competition could involve cooperative effort, it is generally a self-directed endeavor that is not dependent upon the actions of others for success (Fait & Billings, p. 17).

Research indicates that the inclusion of cooperation within competitive situations increases the probability of success. Deutsch (1960) reports that, "To the extent that the results have any generality, greater group or

organizational productivity may be expected when members or subunits are cooperative rather than competitive in their interrelationships (p. 447)." Mintz's results (1951) also demonstrate experimentally the greater productivity produced by a cooperative atmosphere. He found that, "Task achievement was considerably higher in the cooperative situation (McGlynn, p. 29)." The findings of this and other research can be applied to sport. For example, a soccer player on a team probably accepts the fact that it is not so important that he score three goals as that his team win the game.

Cooperation in competition is also displayed when the star basketball player suggests that she, due to the intense defensive attention received, should refrain from shooting and simply act as a decoy to free-up a teammate who would probably be in a situation enabling her to shoot with a greater opportunity for success. In cooperative efforts of this nature, the individual is placing the team/organization goals ahead of personal aspirations. Competitive sport cooperation can be used as a vehicle to produce learning experiences which, hopefully, will be applied to later life endeavors.

In its basic form, the competitive process is successful in identifying the "best" at that given point in time. In and of itself, this may not be detrimental dependent upon the manner in which the process has been conducted. The damage occurs, and becomes increasingly evident, as programs fail to provide for the needs of those individuals not measuring up to the highest competitive standards. When an individual's needs are not provided for that person then becomes a "casualty" and possible a "fatality" with respect to future participation in sport.

Many sport administrators profess that one of the major beneficial effects derived from competitive sport is that it offers the participant an opportunity to control aggression and hostility rather than releasing these feelings. This philosophy is commendable if programs are designed to provide testing situations

for the application of the principles inherent in the philosophy. In most sport programs, however, the opposite is true: the general philosophy is to provide opportunities in which the participants may release aggressive and hostile feelings. On numerous occurances, the venting of emotion is fostered and encouraged, except when such actions are prohibited by the rules and as such may prove detrimental to the individual/team effort.

From an educational and social point of view, it is unfortunate that this type of action is encouraged. Research tends to disapprove of the aggressive release "theory": Bandura and Walters have, "demonstrated that, with children, the overt expression of aggression tends to contribute towards further aggressive acts (Harris, p. 94)." Harris reports that:

> research to date provides enough evidence to suggest that emphasis should be placed upon techniques and strategies to develop inhibition of aggressive behavior rather than regarding sport as a means of catharsis for such emotion (p. 66)."

Finally, Klar points out that, "the findings of Mead, Deutsch, Blau, and Maslow all support the viewpoint that competitiveness may act as a barrier to positive personal and interpresonal adjustment," and that Hoch, Scott, and Edwards have, "suggested that competitive sports and athletics may negatively affect personality development and self-image, foster aggression, and hinder the development of interpersonal relationships (pp. 2-3)."

The concept of direct competition, with its zero or negative-sum game characteristic, can provide the participant with valuable learning experiences. If, however, an individual: is continually subjected to defeat; is constantly excluded from participation without the opportunity to affiliate with a different level program; is not taught the desirability of situational control of aggressive emotions; and, is not taught the necessity for cooperative competition, the concept of direct competition can then become detrimental.

On the other hand, indirect competition can be of educational and social value due to its ability to produce a positive-sum game and its emphasis on intrinsic rather than extrinsic rewards. Yet, as with direct competition, excessive or exclusive use of indirect competition may produce individuals who possess a fear of direct competition and who upon confrontation might act in the manner of "sheep." Certainly such an outcome would not be included among the desired benefits to be derived from sport competition.

It can be concluded that sport competition, either direct or indirect, may be either a beneficial or detrimental process dependent upon its application. If sport administrators wish to encourage and produce people who enjoy sport and physical activity, they must constantly be alert to provide a balanced program of direct and indirect forms of competition. It is clearly evident that the phenomena of exclusion-inclusion, direct and indirect competition, competitive cooperation, and aggression restraint are very complex. It is further evident that if competitive sport is to produce positive educational and social values; sport coaches, sport program directors, and all others associated with the conduction of sport programs should possess an understanding of these concepts and the need for their balanced, intelligent application.

Administrators who promote and sponsor elitist sport programs while failing to provide for the sport needs of the masses contribute towards potential self-destruction. On the other hand, the wise administrator, through the alteration of existing sport program structures or the creation and implementation of new programs, can provide for the needs of the masses and thereby salvage, possibly even generate increased support for, the existing elitist programs.

The fact of the matter is that a need exists for both programs: but one should not function at the expense of the other. Expanded opportunities for sport involvement by all segments of the world population would serve to enhance

the future and quality of the Olympic Games as we presently know them. Moreover, expansion of this nature would serve towards the furtherance of the Olympic Movement and Olympic Ideals as envisioned and nutured by de Coubertin, who believed that:

> Athletic contests seem to provide one of the best means of self-protection, self-assessment, self-confirmation, self-knowledge, and self-education. The athlete should, and can, learn to know, guide and command himself thereby meeting one of the essential moral philosophical principles of the ancient Greeks, "to recognize yourself" (Coubertin, 1948, p. 137).

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